

The Little Mermaid

by HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN




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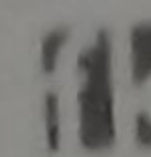
Hans Christian Andersen

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By HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN
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FAR out at sea, the water is blue as the bluest cornflower. It is clear as glass and deeper than any anchor chain can reach. There live the mer-people, down in the deep.

You may think that there is nothing at the bottom of the ocean but white sand. That is not so. The most wonderful trees and plants and water flowers grow on the ocean floor. And all kinds of fish flit in and out among the sea branches.

In the deepest place of all lives the king of the mer-people in a palace made of coral and mussel shells. Once upon a time the king had six mermaid daughters.

The youngest mermaid was the most beautiful of all. Her hair was long, like

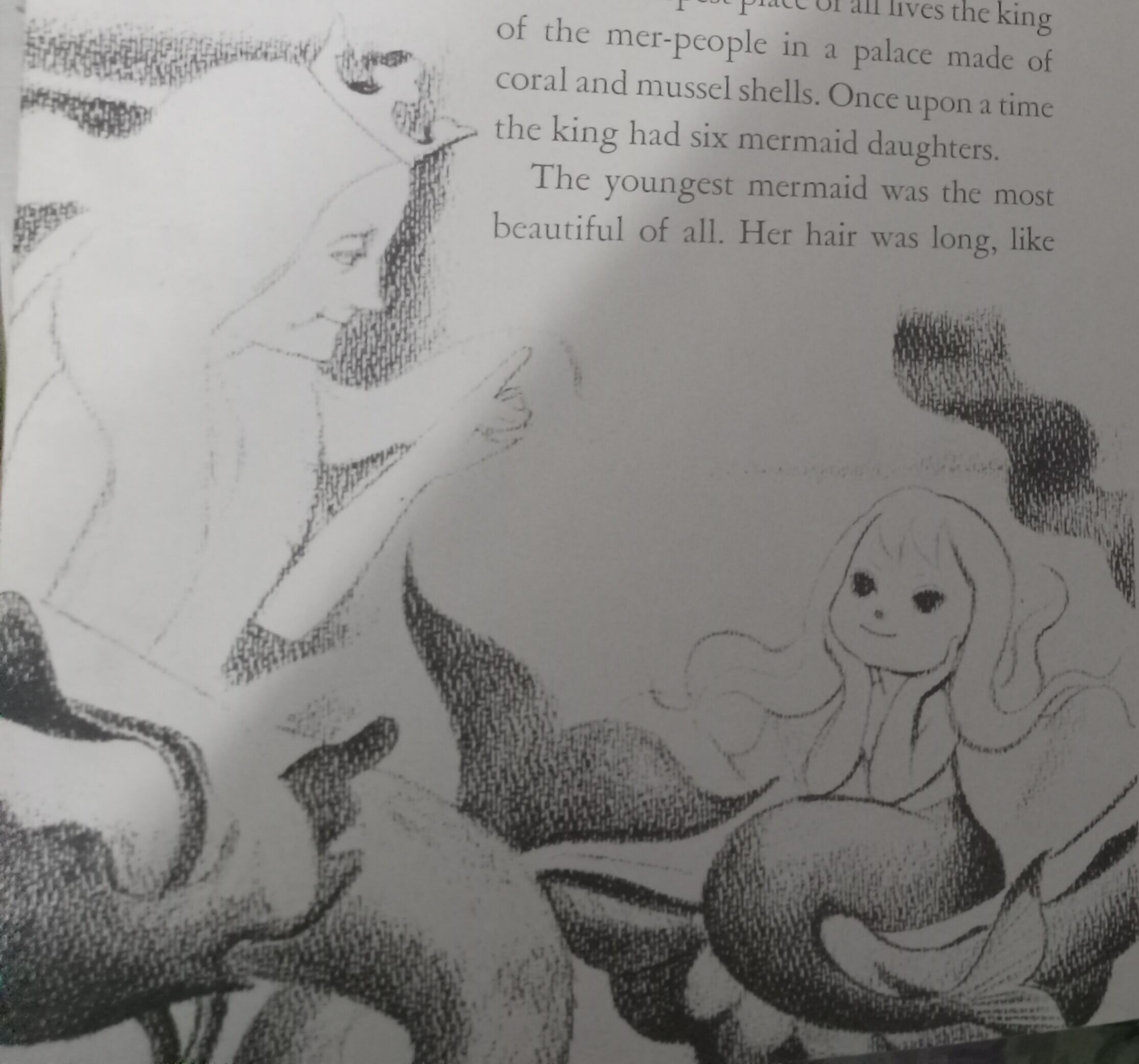
spun gold, and her eyes were a lovely sea green. And like her sisters, the youngest mermaid had no feet. Her body ended in a fish's tail. All day long the mermaids played in halls where water flowers grew out of the walls. And when the castle windows were opened, fish swam in and out, just as birds sometimes fly in when we open windows. Some of the fish even let the little mermaids pat them.

Outside the palace each of the mermaids had her own garden, which she could plant however she wanted. One mermaid had a whale-shaped flower bed. Another had one shaped like herself. The youngest mermaid's flower bed was round. All the flowers in it were red and gold, the colors of the sun. And in the middle of her garden was a statue of a handsome boy carved out of clear white stone. The little mermaid found the statue inside a wrecked ship.


The little mermaid was happy in her sea home. But one of the things she liked best was to hear her grandmother talk of the world above, of ships and cities and human people. How the little mermaid longed to see this world!

"When you are fifteen," said her grandmother, "you will be allowed to go up out of the sea and sit on the rocks and look for yourself." This was a privilege to be given all the mermaids on their fifteenth birthday.

Each sister promised to tell the others what she saw on earth when it was her turn to go up. But none was so full of longing to go as the youngest mermaid.







That year the oldest sister was fifteen. When she came back from her day on earth, she said she had seen hundreds of wonderful things. But what she liked best was to lie on the sandy beach in the moonlight and watch the winking city lights and listen to the faraway sounds of people.

The next year the second sister went out of the water. She saw a whole flock of white swans flying across a red-gold sky.

The third sister was the most daring. She swam up a wide river. She saw houses, children playing and a dog who barked at her and scared her away. She said she would always remember the green hills on earth and the children who could swim even without a fish's tail.

The fourth sister did not go near the land. She stayed in the sea during a raging storm and watched the ships and dolphins.

The fifth sister's fifteenth birthday was in winter, so she saw quite different sights—icebergs that glittered like diamonds but

were bigger than the church towers built by men. The fifth sister sat on one of the largest icebergs, her long hair streaming, and warned passing ships to stay away.

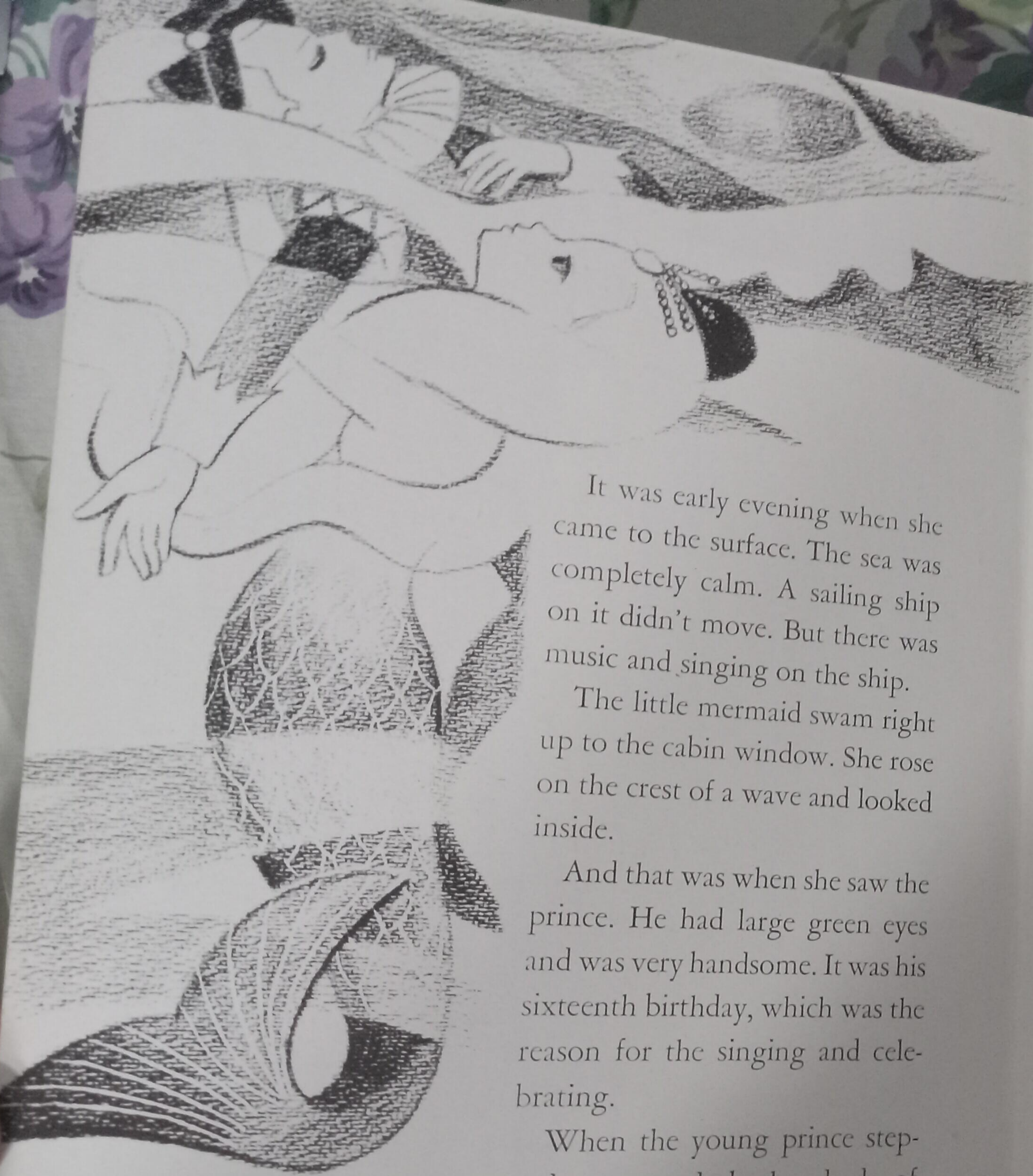
The five older sisters were delighted with the new and beautiful sights they saw above the sea. But now that they were allowed to leave any time they wanted to, they lost interest. The five sisters had become lonely away from their ocean home and agreed that it was where they felt most happy and content.

Only the youngest mermaid felt differently. "If only I were fifteen," she sighed. "I know I would love the world above the sea, and the people who live there."

At last the youngest mermaid was fifteen. "Come along now," her grandmother said and put a pearl pin in her granddaughter's hair.

Then the youngest mermaid rose, lightly as a bubble, through the water.





It was early evening when she came to the surface. The sea was completely calm. A sailing ship on it didn't move. But there was music and singing on the ship.

The little mermaid swam right up to the cabin window. She rose on the crest of a wave and looked inside.

And that was when she saw the prince. He had large green eyes and was very handsome. It was his sixteenth birthday, which was the reason for the singing and celebrating.

When the young prince stepped out on deck, hundreds of rockets shot into the air.

The mermaid had never before seen fireworks and was frightened, but only for a moment. It was beautiful, like all the stars of heaven falling.

The little mermaid couldn't stop looking at the ship and at the handsome prince.

The calm ended and a great storm rose. The waves splashed higher and higher. Lightning flashed. Thunder roared. The ship rolled in a wild and tumbling sea.

The little mermaid was not afraid of the high waves, but the sailors on the ship were. The ship creaked and groaned.

Soon the mast snapped like a stick. The ship turned on her side and the water rushed in.

The little mermaid saw the people on the ship were in great danger. She searched for the young prince and caught sight of him just as the ship broke in two. He was sinking down, down into the deep sea.

For a second the mermaid was delighted. Then she remembered that a human being could not live in the water. Quickly she swam in and out of the floating boards to where the prince had disappeared. She had to save him!

Deep the mermaid dove into the water. She found the prince and gathered him into her arms. His eyes were closed. He was too tired to swim any more and would have died if it hadn't been for the little mermaid.

Morning came. The storm was over. Color returned to the prince's cheeks though his eyes stayed shut.





The little mermaid kissed the prince and thought to herself how much he looked like the marble statue in her garden.

Then the little mermaid saw land. The waves were carrying them to a sandy beach in front of a large church.

The mermaid laid the prince on the sand, taking care that he faced the sun so that it could warm him.

All at once the church bells rang. A group of girls ran through the church garden.

One of the girls, who had lovely blond braids and eyes as sea-green as the mermaid's, saw the prince and went to him.

As she did, the prince sat up. He smiled at the young girl and held out his hand to her. The prince thought it was she who had saved him. He didn't see the little mermaid, who hid behind some rocks and covered her face with sea foam.

Sadly the little mermaid returned to her father's home. Her sisters asked her what she had seen but she told them nothing. The little mermaid felt too unhappy to speak.

Many an evening and many a morning she rose to where she had last seen the prince. But she never saw him, and each time she went home sadder than ever.

The little mermaid's one comfort was to sit in her garden and put her arms around the marble statue that looked so much like the prince.

At last, she could bear it no longer and told her sisters what had happened.

One of her sisters had heard of the prince and knew where he lived.

"Come little sister," she said. Then all the sisters linked arms and rose out of the water.

The little mermaid saw the prince's palace, which was very splendid and beautiful.

Now that she knew where he lived, the little mermaid came often to the surface and sat under the prince's balcony. Nightly she watched him though he never saw her.

More and more the little mermaid grew to love the prince, and more and more she wanted to live in the world of people.



Her grandmother tried to explain the differences between human people and mer-people. "They have legs," she told the little mermaid. "We have a fish's tail."

"Oh," said the little mermaid. "I would gladly give my fish's tail and all my years living under water for just one day on land as a human girl."

"You must not say such things," said her grandmother sharply. "We have a much happier life here."

"I don't care," said the little mermaid. "Grandmother, isn't there *anything* I can do that will make me a human girl?"

"Only one thing," answered her grandmother. "You must win the love of a human man. He must love you so much that he marries you. Then you, too, would be human."

The grandmother shook her head. "But this is foolishness. For what we find pretty down here—a fish's tail—they find ugly on earth. They think the two clumsy things called legs are beautiful."

The little mermaid looked at her fish's tail and sighed.

"Be happy with what you have," said her grandmother.

That night the mer-people had a party. All the mermaids and mermen danced to the sounds of their own voices, which are very lovely. And the most beautiful voice of all belonged to the little mermaid, though she did not feel like singing.

Instead she left the party and went to visit the sea witch. "I have always been afraid of her," said the little mermaid. "But perhaps she can show me how to become human."

The sea witch was sitting next to her pot of nasty smelling brew. "Ha," she said with a sneer. "I know why you came. But you are a fool. Exchanging your fish's tail for two stumps called legs will only bring you pain and sorrow. Still I will give you some of my magic brew and tell you how to do it if you give me something in return."

"What?" asked the little mermaid.

"Your lovely voice," said the sea witch.

"Then what will I have left?" asked the little mermaid.

"Your face, your long golden hair—enough to charm any man," said the sea witch. "But," continued the witch, "there is one more thing. If you do not win the prince's heart, you will turn to sea foam the morning after he marries another."

"I will gladly take that chance," said the little mermaid.







Then she swam to shore with some of the magic brew. The minute she put it to her lips, the little mermaid felt a sharp stabbing pain, as her fish's tail turned into two legs.

She fainted, the pain was so great. And when she woke up, the handsome prince was standing in front of her.

The prince asked the little mermaid who she was and how she got there.

Alas, she couldn't answer because she had given away her voice. All she could do was look at the prince.

The prince took her by the hand and they went into the palace. Every step the mermaid took on her new legs hurt, just as the sea witch had warned her.

The little mermaid was given lovely clothes to wear and was by far the most beautiful girl in the palace even though she couldn't speak or sing.

The prince was completely charmed by her. Daily they went horseback riding in the green woods or climbed mountains together.

One day the prince told the little mermaid, "You are dearer to me than anyone else." What the prince meant was that he liked her best as a good friend. It never occurred to him to make the little mermaid his wife. For the prince was still in love with the girl he thought saved him after the shipwreck. "That girl is the only girl in all the world I will marry," he told the little mermaid. "You are a lot like her, but you are not her. If only I could find her again!"



Not being able to speak, the little mermaid could not cry out, "But it was I who saved you!" How it hurt to know the prince loved another. "Still," thought the little mermaid, "I am here and she is not."

Soon there was a rumor that the prince was going to marry a neighboring king's daughter. "I don't intend to marry her," the prince told the little mermaid. "But I might as well be polite." So they set out in the royal ship to visit her country.

Most amazingly, the king's daughter turned out to be the very girl who had found the prince on the beach. "It is you!" cried the prince. "What I never dared hope has come true. Oh I am all too happy!"

The little mermaid heard the words and felt her heart breaking. The wedding was planned for that very day. The morning after would mean her death. She would turn into sea foam as soon as the sun rose.

That night in the neighboring king's country, church bells rang, cannons fired and flags waved from the windows.

After the wedding, the little mermaid wished the bridal couple joy in spite of her breaking heart. "You must stay and be friends to us both," said the prince.

Then everyone got back on the royal ship. There was laughing and dancing and a party which reminded the little mermaid of the night she first met the prince. And though her heart was breaking she danced for the prince and his bride.

"After this evening I will never see him again," thought the

little mermaid sadly. "I have given up my home and my family and my lovely voice for him. I had no idea it would happen—that he would really marry another, as he now has."

Much later, the royal couple went arm-in-arm to their cabin. The ship became quiet. The little mermaid stood on deck, looking out at the sea.

All at once she saw her sisters rise to the surface of the water. Their hair was short. It had been cut off and given to the sea witch in return for a sharp knife.

"Here," said the oldest sister, holding up the knife. "Plunge this into the prince's heart before the sun rises. Do this and you will not die. Instead you will grow a fish's tail and become a mermaid again."

"Hurry!" the sisters urged. "The sky is already getting light."





Then the mermaid sisters sank back into the water.

The little mermaid went to the prince's bed and drew aside the curtains. But instead of killing him, she bent down and kissed him.

She looked at the sky, already glowing pink. Then she looked at the knife in her hand. The little mermaid still loved the prince. She could not hurt him.

Suddenly she flung the knife far out into the ocean. And right after, she threw herself from the ship. Down, down into the sea she fell. And as she fell, she felt her body dissolving into sea foam.

Yet oddly the little mermaid didn't feel dead. She felt the foam being gathered up and shaped into another form. "To whom am I coming?" she asked.

Soft voices answered, "To the daughters of the air. Although you did not win the love of a human man, you have suffered and been brave and unselfish. You have raised yourself into a world of the spirits of the air. We fly unseen and do good deeds. You will too."

The little mermaid lifted her arms toward the sun. For the first time she cried real tears.

And for the last time she saw the prince and his bride. They were on the deck of the ship searching for her.

The little mermaid blew them both a kiss and then, with the other daughters of the air, soared off on a pink cloud to bring happiness to others, especially to little children.

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